# Daphne the Cat: re-imagining human-animal boundaries on Facebook

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***To cite this article:***

Policarpo, V. (2020). Daphne the Cat: Reimagining human–animal boundaries on Facebook. *The Sociological Review*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120918167

# Daphne the Cat: re-imagining human-animal boundaries on Facebook

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## Introduction: constructing companion animals on social media

Daphne is a female cat whose story was publicly unveiled on the Facebook page of a Portuguese animal shelter. An 'official' post describes how she was returned to the shelter one year after being taken into the guardianship of the very same female adopter who was now returning her. Daphne is described as being deeply sad and even 'depressed,' as shown by her behavior of almost permanent stillness, lack of appetite and (voluntary) starvation (refusing to eat what she is given). The shelter's post reports that she was accused (by the former adopter) of urinating outside her sandbox, and of disturbing the conjugal relationship between the adopter and the latter's partner. The post proceeds to announce that Daphne is again available for adoption, and to regret attitudes that cause animals to be relinquished on behalf of personal life issues.

However, this is not the only version of Daphne's story. On the very day of its publication, Daphne's former guardian (hereafter called 'the adopter') posted a long comment correcting his gender identity (male, and not female) and explaining his own version of the events, in their various stages: the decision to adopt and the route leading to it, involving the shelter; the phase in which Daphne shared his life and home; and her return to the shelter. He describes Daphne's adaptation to her new home as a very difficult process, during which she could not get along with the other cat, or with the humans living in the house. She is described as being unsociable, always hiding and avoiding contact, and finally engaging in certain behaviors intentionally, such as urinating on her guardians' clothes, or huffing and snorting. In this version, she was not happy, and returning her to the shelter was a painful act which was reckoned the better way to find her another family and home where she could be happier. Some of these problems are attributed to Daphne's age, which made it more difficult for her to adjust to her new home.

This version, as one might expect, differs considerably from the shelter's, both in language and in tone. This article explores the construction of multiple versions of Daphne, as an individual; cats as a species; and companion animals in general, and the role that the particular time and space of social media play in this process. Its innovative contribute to the scholarship on human-animal studies is two-fold: by using actor-network theory, in particular

the concept of animal practices (Law & Miele 2011), to better understand human relations with companion animals, namely cats; by addressing the ways non-human animals and human-animal boundaries are done, and undone, in the context of social media and digital media practices. In this way, I expect to make a contribution to a sociology for nonhuman animals (Peggs, 2013), and for humans alike: by increasing our awareness of the ways humans socially categorize and relate to nonhuman animals, sociological thinking may play an important part in the improvement of interspecies relations, and hence in the life conditions of both humans and nonhumans.

Let us then enter Daphne's story by responding to two main questions. How is a companion animal defined, in digital discursive practices performed in social media? How does this kind of digital interaction contribute to the renegotiation of human-animal boundaries?

*The specific condition of cats, as companion animals*

Drawing on literature from the field of Animal Studies, the discussion that the topic sparks links to the fact that Daphne is, in fact, a cat. That is to say that she is not really an animal, but rather a *companion animal*, getting attention due to this *specific condition* (*vis-à-vis* other animals) (Serpell, 1986; Tuan, 1984; Beck and Katcher, 1996; Fudge, 2002 and 2008). She

has a personal name. She shares (or shared) the domestic space with humans, often viewed as a member of the family (Charles and Davies, 2008; Charles, 2014). As sharing a status of affective proximity to humans, she is inedible, and therefore will never be eaten (Fudge, 2002 and 2008). And she is viewed and referred to as an individual with a personality of her own, rather than simply a member of a species, in this case felines. Like most companion animals, she is deemed 'family,' the blurred boundaries between humans and non-humans thus contributing to the definition of what a contemporary family is: relational, based on emotions and affects; and individualistic, where the individual is expected to flourish with the help of the family group, be that individual human or non-human.

She therefore occupies, like most companion animals, a liminal condition (Fudge, 2002 and 2008), that makes her status and position ambiguous: she lies somewhere in-between humans and animals; she is neither 'completely an animal,' nor is she completely human either. This liminality is intensified by her gender condition: being a female, she is expected to behave with docility and tenderness, developing with her human guardians an affectionate relationship. She is thus criticised for not complying to gender norms and behaviours, her animality being built alongside her gender. Moreover, due to her condition as a companion animal (either effective or prospective), she gains much more visibility than other animals, such as cattle, who are edible and therefore eaten, including by companion animals. Thus,

she (involuntarily) participates in the 'visible/invisible' conundrum (Fudge, 2002 and 2008; Cole and Stewart, 2014), whereby the fact that some animals (companion animals) gain increasing visibility (including in political terms and the pledge to support animal rights) may paradoxically result in the invisibility of others (animals raised for food, entertainment, clothing).

Moreover, because she is a cat, Daphne certainly occupies a better position than other animals in the hierarchy of pets, as cats and dogs are rated as closer to humans than other companion species (birds, mice, fish and especially reptiles) (Redmalm, 2014). However, despite all the attention she seems to get from the Facebook community of 'animal-lovers' gathering around the animal shelter's Facebook page, Daphne is also subject to a somewhat unstable subjectification. She is made a 'subject,' with a personality of her own, and rights attached to it, but only under certain conditions (Fudge, 2008): adaptation to human lifestyles, not being aggressive, being friendly, and adjusting to the home and its inhabitants. This instability and conditionality of her definition as a member of a 'preferred' species, deemed as closer to humans than other species, results in conflicting versions of her, and in the varied moral judgments passed on her story and its protagonists.

*The particular time-space of social media and Facebook*

Critical animal scholars argue that the ways animals are depicted in mainstream media reproduce and legitimize dominant ideologies of antroparchy and speciesism, playing a role in maintaining nonhuman animals under human domination (Almirón et al 2018). This implies a critique of legitimated categories such as 'meat', 'pet' or even 'animal', exposed as social and political constructs of a hegemonic (human, white, male, young) order, working as part of the 'machine without a centre' of anthropocentrism (Agamben, 2004; Filippi, 2017). Although these approaches sometimes overlook other aspects of human-animal relations, such as the agency of nonhuman animals, or the more web-based, unstable nature of power relations between species, some of their questions can be extended to social media.

The narrativization of Daphne's story takes place in a very particular setting: the official Facebook page of a Portuguese animal shelter. This means that we have to consider the specific features of this social media platform and the mediated interactions it enables.

As a social media platform, Facebook constitutes a tool with in-built communication features, frequently used to communicate with other users, networked through specific technological properties. It presents particular technological features that are appropriated by individuals, who transform them as social resources to better connect with others. These 'affordances' (Baym, 2010; McVeigh-Schultz and Baym, 2015), such as the timeline, the 'like button,' the public display of the network and interactions, or the opportunity to post

multimedia messages (text, video, image), make it a particular time-space where interactions and experiences acquire a specific nature.

The ways in which these technological features are used is key to understand their impact, as many have documented (eg Baym, 2010; Chambers, 2013; Couldry, 2012; Lambert, 2015; Madianou, 2016). Thriving on emotions and the affective engagement of users with the contents displayed, social media also rely on the active involvement of users, who become both producers and consumers of such emotions and affective states. Such uses are rooted in the ebb and flow of personal life, in particular the need to build a lifetime, family or friendship memory, to produce a meaning for their own existence, or to be constantly in contact with others, thus adhering to a social norm of being in a permanent relational continuum (Policarpo, 2019). As such, the ways users engage in the discussion around Daphne's story will resort, to a certain extent, to elements of their own personal experience and daily life with companion animals, both used to construct specific worldviews and positioning towards the story, and the topics involved.

I argue that these features contribute to extend human-animal practices in time and place, in specific ways, thus making social media distinctive in their production. In the following section, I try to define 'animal practices' as comprising the 'virtual' media landscapes

produced by its users. Such a capacity relates in particular with two features: reach and mobility (Baym 2010). Other features are also critical, such as interactivity and replicability.

*Animal practices on Facebook*

Critical to understand how social media practices contribute to defining *what an animal is* (as defined by humans) is the notion of 'animal practices.' Drawing on Science and Technology Studies, and following a Theory of Practice approach, Law and Miele (2011) propose that animals do not *pre-exist* the practices they are involved in. Rather, they are the *relational effects* of those practices, in which they too participate. They *are being done* in the unfolding of actions, as well as all other participants in those practices and contexts – humans, and other non-humans (objects, technology, etc.).

I argue that the legacy of ANT (Latour 1999, 2005; Law 1999) helps to shed light into the ways companion animals participate in wider networks of relations and assemblages, that enable them to 'become what they are'. These animals participate in practices with other humans and non-humans, some of which extend beyond the physical scene they inhabit. Here, technology and social media become particularly relevant, as the animals' participation in such entanglements is (technologically) reproduced and expanded in time and space

through a range of social media practices. They extend themselves beyond the scenes in which the 'flesh and blood' animal participates.

Hence, the animal becomes 'who he is' through complex and extensive webs of relations. In some of these networks, he participates directly. In others, he is evoked. All of them concur to the emergent definition either of a particular individual (eg. 'our cat'); or of the species to which he belongs. This definition, and its multiple versions, reflect and impact on the ways humans relate to these animals, and thus on their lives and welfare. It also contributes to build a story as much of (human-animal) conflict, as of wilderness and resistance – versions of 'less domesticated' animals, who resist human dominion.

According to this perspective, animals are beings constantly 'in the making', relationally 'becoming with' the humans and non-humans around them. Social media practices are one type of social practices, among others, that contribute to this constant 'making' of the animals, as parts of the networks and assemblages to which they belong. It could be argued that, because Daphne has a body, materiality would impose itself as pre-existent and stable. However, her body is also affected and shaped by her interactions with her environment, other animals and material elements. It is also the result of all these fluctuating elements, that change in time, place and power (eg. the skinny/starving body, the fat/well fed body, the ill/healthy body, the sterilised/fertile body).

As a result of these ever changing, specific, practices, different, and sometimes conflicting, versions of the same animal can be enacted. For example, at the veterinary surgery, the same animal, infected with a contagious disease, may emerge both as a *sentient-being*, demanding special care and attention to their wellbeing; and as an *infectious-agent*, an animal that must be put in quarantine to avoid contamination of other animals, humans and non-humans.

Therefore, far from being an ontological and static reality, an animal is better described as a *contingent*, *unstable*, and *ongoing becoming with* humans, other non-human animals, spaces, and objects, other natural environmental and contextual elements. From this perspective, the authors talk about *relationally emergent versions of the animal*. 'Animals are the heterogeneous material and relational consequences of specific and patterned ordering practices that extend beyond local scenes to include more or less distant times and places' (Law and Miele, 2011, p. 62). 'Animal practices' in relation to Daphne encompass a wide range of contexts and actors: those described in the versions of her story (at home, at the shelter); but also the digital discursive practices that evolve from the narrativization of her life.

In the following section, I will explain the methodological options that structured the approach to the empirical data. I will then proceed to explore the discourses made public on Facebook posts, investigating how animal practices can be identified in the opposite

narratives about the case ('trigger' and 'counter'), eventually leading to the emergence of different versions of the same cat.

*Research Methodology*

This article draws on the analysis of one particular case study: the story of the cat Daphne, as described in one post of the official Facebook page of a Portuguese animal shelter, published in 2017. Both human and non-human participants in the digital story are fully anonymized: the animal shelter is not identified, nor is the human or the cat, named with the pseudonym 'Daphne'. These standard anonymization procedures have as a main purpose to preserve the participants' identities and privacy, despite the fact that the Facebook page is public, and therefore so is its content. For the same reasons, verbatim quotes from participants were avoided, and the contents of their discourses paraphrased in order to avoid identification. Analysis of public content published on Facebook also followed the principle of 'fair use'.

The first post, of the animal shelter, gathered a voluminous and prolonged stream of responses from Facebook users. At the time of writing, the post and its subsequent comments had gathered around 3,7K reactions (ranging from the common 'like'/thumb-up, to anger,

sadness and other emotions), more than 900 comments, and around 700 shares. In a 200-word text, it sets the tone of the discussion that followed. A post from the adopter followed it, gathering around 400 reactions from Facebook users, and around 170 comments. Because these were the first posts, and the adopter's post immediately followed the initial one from the shelter, they gathered important comments, both in length and in content. Many were comments about these comments, and not about the original messages. The subsequent interpretations draw on a qualitative analysis of this sub-sample of 170 comments on the adopter's post, which include reactions to the initial post from the shelter.

The article draws on two different types of analysis, in order to explore the latent categories contributing to define, and therefore construct, non-human animals on these digital landscapes. Firstly, *narrative analysis* enabled, for each one of the two main posts, the identification of the plot line, its main characters, and tones of discourse. The analysis aimed primarily at practices, rather than discourses, a turn documented as privileging a focus on interaction at a local level, an emphasis on the contextualizing power of narratives, and a commitment to social-theoretical concerns (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 3). This 'practice-based' approach, oriented towards the capture of how small stories are embedded in everyday life, and are part of the 'fabric of social practices that ordinary people engage in', has been later applied to social media and online contexts (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p.

266). A-typical features of small stories emerge from digital platforms and practices, such as fragmentation, open-endedness or multiple authoring of a post, enhancing their proliferation. The practices of storytelling in social media are also often anchored in reporting events from the poster's daily life. Elements that can be found in the making of Daphne's story, both directly, in the posts of the shelter and the adopter; and indirectly, in the posts where users describe details of their own daily lives with animal companions.

Secondly, content analysis using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10 enabled the extraction of the main thematic categories in the posts of both the shelter and the adopter, as well as of the users that subsequently commented on them. The analysis followed an inductive, grounded, procedure, privileging a logic of discovery, without a previous set of pre-determined categories. It produced 41 principal nodes (categories), of which 7 included child-nodes. Some verbatim expressions were captured as in-vivo categories that suggested insights into the way Daphne in particular, or companion animals in general, were being depicted in the online exchanges. Besides the verbal text in the posts and comments, the analysis also took into account the formal content of the social media affordances, enacted by users as they contributed to the making of the story. This included the consideration, in context, of the number and type of emotional reactions to others' posts (Likes/Thumbs up,

laughter, surprise, cry, sadness and anger), emoticons or posting of visual content (photos, video).

Although both these types of discourse analysis may be less common in ANT, their use is justified by the fact that social media offer a particular landscape for storytelling, as part of wider social practices, which they also contribute to outline. The following section explores precisely the power of social media stories, as told by their users, to perform human-animal practices.

**Animal practices on Facebook and the emergent versions of Daphne**

The characters involved in the storyline are not always easy to identify. One could begin by saying that the leading role belongs, obviously, to Daphne the cat. However, that is not always the case. Nevertheless, it is Daphne who opens up the storyline, even if only indirectly. Other leading characters are the animal shelter, who discloses Daphne's story, and the adopter. Mainly in secondary roles, we find all Facebook users, nearly all of them presented as female identities, who react to and post comments about Daphne's story. Finally, there are all the other animals mentioned in the stories told by these Facebook users in their

posts; but who, just like Daphne, will become shadowed by the human narratives around them.

The plot unfolds in two main narratives: the one presented by the animal shelter, what we call the 'trigger-narrative,' as it triggers all the subsequent discussion on the shelter's Facebook page; and the 'counter-narrative' from the adopter, in which he presents his own version of Daphne's story.

*The 'trigger-narrative'*

The 'trigger-narrative' is the first one to be put forward, and in that sense leads the way to the construction of Daphne's story in this virtual arena of Facebook. We can call it the 'hegemonic version,' not only because it was posted by the institution that runs the Facebook page (thus becoming the 'official' version), but also because most posts and comments of the users will follow and expand it. This account is built around a tone of *accusation* of the adopter's decision and behavior and, more subtly, of the adopter himself, as a wrongdoer lacking the moral qualities to be a proper guardian of a companion animal. In a 200-word text, the shelter builds Daphne's story upon two main types of language.

A ‘juridical language’ evokes a judicial process, in which a defendant (the adopter) is already on trial. Initially, it is used to describe the behavior of the adopter toward Daphne, who was ‘immediately accused and judged,’ without being given the right of defense, and was immediately ‘sentenced’ to return to the shelter. Then the direction of the storyline shifts, using the same (and other) juridical terms to refer to the adopter, but combined with psychological reasoning. Expressions such as ‘moral crime,’ ‘sentence’ or ‘trial’ are combined with more psychological and existential ones, such as ‘human emptiness’, ‘lack of interiority’, ‘absence of humanity’ or ‘existential void’. Claiming the role of a court of justice committed to restoring the ‘truth,’ the text declares Daphne ‘innocent’ and her sentence ‘unfair’ and out of proportion. The text closes with an open, emotionally charged articulation of a moral judgment on the adopter’s behavior and on the dynamics of private and intimate life. Hence, it becomes a double moral judgment.

*The ‘counter-narrative’*

In contrast, the ‘counter-narrative’ of the adopter is based much more on a description of facts, and is less emotionally charged. Published after the initial post from the shelter, its tone is mainly one of complaint and self-defense. In a much longer text (around 900 words), the adopter begins by coming out as a male, so we learn that his gender had been changed in an

attempt to conceal his identity. Then, his discourse is built up around four different types of language to convey his version of the story: 'factual,' 'professional,' 'self-defensive,' and 'animal-focused.'

The first distinctive feature is the 'factual' tone of the narrative. It focuses mainly on the description of facts and events, in an attempt to produce an objective and dispassionate account. This is in clear contrast to the post from the shelter, which takes a highly emotive tone in conveying its message. Here, rather than focusing on emotional states, the narrative presents facts in detail, following a temporal order. It reconstitutes the timeline of the adoption as a joint experience of both the adopter and the animal, starting from the point when he (and his partner) decided to adopt, proceeding through the contact with the shelter, the act of taking the animal home, the first times together, and the period in which the animal began to be perceived as problematic, and ending with the decision to return her to the shelter. The story is thus presented with a higher degree of complexity (mostly composed of 'facts') and emotions are not openly displayed. The descriptive and factual tone of the text suggests a distinction between rationality/emotionality, in which the rational (and factual) remain mostly on the side of the narrator (the adopter).

This is not the same as saying that emotions are absent. Instead, they are managed with parsimony, in what can also be interpreted as a form of gender performance, privileging and

enacting a ‘masculinised rationality’ over ‘feminised emotionality’. They remain subtly suggested by the way the factual argumentation proceeds. This is true mainly concerning the evaluation of the shelter’s behavior, which the adopter accuses of misconduct and lack of professionalism. This is the second distinctive feature of the ‘counter-narrative’ of the adopter: the insistence on a ‘professional’ dimension of the events, rather than on exclusively personal and emotional ones. The adopter accuses the shelter of breach of confidentiality (eg displaying information about his private life) and of lying (eg about the age of the cat, or in their version of the facts) in order to achieve their goals, thus producing false declarations. The topic of the ‘lie’ (vs truth), namely about Daphne’s age, becomes particularly central to the storyline, as age emerges as an important feature of the adoption process, and hence of its (lack of) success. Moreover, the ‘lie’ prompts from the adopter a question about the shelter’s honesty and professional integrity. Therefore, an intention of public complaint and exposure of the shelter’s professional misconduct flows alongside that of ‘self-defense.’ The same thing happens with the shelter’s ‘trigger-narrative,’ in which this same intention of public exposure of the adopter’s misconduct accompanies the ‘juridical’ tone of accusation and trial.

This narrative is also ‘animal-focused,’ in the sense that it explicitly talks about Daphne – her features as an animal, as a member of a specific species (felines), and her particular

personality (as a subject). It draws on the characteristics of her personality to describe her as 'problematic' and therefore to build a version of Daphne as disruptive, thus justifying the need to return her to the shelter. It depicts Daphne as a non-docile cat, who lacked social skills, and could not socialize either with the other cat, or with the humans living in the house (the adopter and his partner). She fled from all attempts at assimilation and could never adapt herself to her new home and family. Finally, the text describes how she displayed 'less affectionate' attitudes toward her human guardians, namely by huffing, snorting, and most of all urinating deliberately over her guardians' clothes. The lack of docility emerges as a particularly important trait to define her. One can argue that this is also linked to her gender: being a female, Daphne fails to accomplish human expectations on both her animality and her gender (Cudworth 1998). Viewed as a non-docile female animal, she crosses the thin line between domestication and wilderness, impossible to control through ownership. This is how the description of Daphne's behavior builds up toward justification of the need to return her to the shelter. Consequently, the discourse evolves toward a 'self-defensive' tone, which is where the 'counter-narrative' gets more emotional. On the one hand, due to the pervasive presence of feelings of injustice, the adopter declares his sense of being unreasonably accused and convicted, and his urge to restore justice by presenting 'the truth about the facts.' On the other hand, the decision to return is presented as a result of long-term weighing and

deliberation, just like the decision to adopt. A situation felt as unsustainable and 'unhealthy' for both parties involved pushes the humans first toward a dilemma, and then toward a decision felt as an emotional burden.

*Evolution of the storyline: how a tale of adoption becomes a tale of abandonment*

The vast majority of the comments triggered by the 'counter-narrative' are from users with feminine identities, and echo the 'trigger-version' as told by the shelter. The space to post a 'comment,' a particular affordance of social media platforms, is also used by commenters to tell their own stories of their companion animals (cats, but also dogs), often problematic and pierced by conflict.

The content analysis showed that the most frequently repeated themes were the *behavior and personality of the animal* (n=112), the *return and/or abandonment of the animal* (n=75), *affects and emotions* (n=73), *kinship bonding* (n=37) and *mutual adaptation* (humans to animal, n=17; animal to humans, n=15). Other frequent categories were the *comments to the shelter* (its work and way of conducting the case; n=29), *meta-comments* (n=27), ie comments without a proper content related to the topic, but just commenting on the tone or existence of a previous comment; and open *insults* (n=20). Two relevant categories for the construction of the thread of the narrative were the topic of the *moral intention of animals'*

*behavior* (and Daphne's in particular; n=12), *references to the adopter's private and family life* (eg conflicts; n=12), *defense of the adopter* (n=11), and *the age of the animal* (n=11).

As the comments progress, the storyline evolves to become a *tale of abandonment*. All distinction between 'return' (to a shelter from where she had been adopted) and 'abandonment' is erased. The two behaviors are equated with all consequent moral assumptions, namely in regard to the moral character of the adopter (as a 'bad' person, incapable of love for animals and humans) and the adopter's behavior toward Daphne, namely returning her to the shelter. Intense emotions arise around the topic, but the main issue is always the appropriate behavior of a 'good guardian,' the moral 'good qualities' required to adopt a pet (eg enduring patience), the implications of the act of adopting (eg, lifelong, unbreakable commitment), and the social and psychological conditions needed to do so (eg not having too many animals, knowing how to take care of them, spending enough time with them).

What about Daphne? How is she portrayed and what does that tell about the ways in which the boundaries between humans and companion animals are (re)built?

*The 'two-fold cat': emergent versions of Daphne the Cat*

The discursive practices around Daphne's life – her behavior, her moral intentions, her life with her human guardians, her disgrace in being returned to the shelter – evolve to produce two different, and emergent, versions of this particular companion animal. These practices are discursive, rely mostly on verbal (written) language, and take place in the digital time-space of social media. Because these discourses elaborate upon Daphne's behavior at home, first, and in the shelter, afterwards, Daphne participates in them indirectly. Nevertheless, and quite paradoxically, not only is she unaware of all the discussion taking place around her, but also of its possible impact on her future. Daphne is, thus, at the same time a participant and an absent element in this process, empowered and disempowered, or an 'absent referent,' to adapt Carol Adams's (1990) expression. Just as the death of the animal who lies on the plate to be eaten remains absent to the meat-eater, so Daphne remains absent from these discursive practices in which her story is being remade. This absence cloaks the human dominion over her non-human condition, present in each act in which humans make decisions about her life, just as the absence of animal death hides the violence contained in the act of meat-eating. Hence, the 'disappearance' of Daphne ends by protecting the conscience of the humans involved in the story, all committed, in their own way, to her wellbeing and good fortune.

Through such social media interactions, the reverberation and reinvention of the 'animal practices' in which she participates produce different and emergent versions of Daphne, as a cat. She becomes the effect of these 'performative consequences of sets of somewhat choreographed but largely unknowable practices' (Law and Miele, 2011, p. 50). This radically challenges essentialist assumptions about the ontological nature of non-human animals, as a 'real', pre-existent, essentialist, property of beings. Rather, the 'real' Daphne is a 'being in the making', emergent from the web of relations that involve her. Here, social media practices add to other social practices in which Daphne participates (in the home, in the shelter), and through which she is redefined.

Animal practices are *heterogenous, relational, extended* in time and spaces, and quite *specific*, emerging from moment-by-moment patterns and flows (Law and Miele, 2011). They are *heterogenous* because they are composed of different kinds of elements: persons, objects, technologies and devices, buildings and material arrangements. In the complete presentation of Daphne's story, the whole environment in which she is depicted is critical to the development of events: the other cat in the house, the desk underneath which she hides, the clothes in which she urinates, the cat litter, in which she *was supposed* to urinate always.

All these play an important part in how the story unfolds, through a 'bodily choreography' (p. 55) which follows a pattern. They are thus a 'patterned set of relations,' (p. 55) relating

all relevant components together in a specifically ordered manner. That is why they are *relational*. The many components of Daphne's story (humans, animals, objects, space) only assume their exact form, their exact role, inside this relational frame in which all bodies move according to each other, in 'bodily choreographies': inside the house, Daphne stuck underneath a desk, Daphne and the other cat quarrelling, humans trying to feed her, Daphne huffing to the other cats and to her human guardians.

Animal practices are also *extended in time and space*, which means that they depend on distant relations and contexts, including information technologies or transport systems. The patterns of these extended relations also need to be ordered. They are 'relational patterns of ordering that reach beyond the scene.' (p. 56). And this is particularly relevant to the case of Daphne, as it continues to be constructed beyond the material world in which she moves, in the digital dimension of social media. The relational patterns of ordered interactions between Daphne and all other elements (humans, other animals, objects, food, etc.) are re-signified and extended in meaning through its re-telling on social media.

Finally, these practices are very *specific*; they are anchored in moment-by-moment patterns, such as the guardian's description of trying, over the months, to reach Daphne, who kept resisting common patterns of socializing with humans and other cats. This specificity enables us to understand, and find our way, through the 'messiness' of a world where humans and

(companion) animals live together and share common spaces and times, sometimes fluidly, sometimes in conflicting ways. They make it possible to catch how practices may be *inconsistent*, *contradictory* and *conflictual*.

Therefore, animal practices (like other forms of social practices) are performative. They do different things. And animals are the effects of those practices, in the sense that they are being done in the unfolding of actions. They are a consequence of the action as it unfolds, as a result of 'different, complex and uncertainly related logics of materially heterogenous practice.' (p. 60). Hence, the same animal may be enacted as different animals, in different versions, depending on the articulation of elements that compose specific practices.

This is how two different versions of Daphne emerge from these 'animal practices' performed by humans on social media, which bear the specificity, despite referring to animals' behaviors and lives, of animals themselves being unable to directly participate in them.

On the one hand, there is the version of the '*animal-victim,*' triggered by the animal shelter narrative, and amplified by all Facebook users who support it. Here, Daphne is presented as a disempowered victim of human mean conduct and lack of commitment, a passive subject of multiple and sequential forms of maltreatment, ending in tragic abandonment. This version claims to protect animals' rights, and Daphne's in particular, namely the right to a home and

a ‘proper’ guardian. The animal is compared to a child, or to a member of the kinship network, whose care is represented as a lifetime commitment, excluding all possibility of interruption, let alone abandonment. This is actually where the argumentation based on kinship ties becomes more powerful. A set of normative representations about contemporary kinship and family come to the surface, in which bonding ties are seen as unbreakable, at odds with the diversity of experiences of ‘real families’ when facing several forms of rupture and reorganization, from divorce, remarriage, couples living apart together, lone parenthood, singlehood, etc. Such normative representations are used to perform a version of animals in which they remain under the eternal stewardship of humans. In particular, the animal is compared to a child, as someone who lacks the full competences of the adults. But while children grow up and become adults themselves, this is not the case with this emergent version of animals as victims, who seem to remain indefinitely in a ‘child-like’ stage which claims full protection from humans. In this sense, the boundary between human and non-human animals is reinforced, undermining our thinking of companion animals as autonomous subjects.

On the other hand, the ‘counter-narrative’ from the adopter and his very few defenders produce a version of Daphne as the ‘*animal-maladjusted.*’ This is a version in which she is depicted as unable to adapt to her human guardian and to a common life with him, with all

that it entails: the other humans, the space in the house, the other animals living there. In this version, the core argumentation comes mainly from the description of the interaction between Daphne and her surrounding environment, during the year in which she lived with the adopter. Hence, it highlights the *heterogeneity* and *relationality* of animal practices, how they are composed of different types of elements, organized in specifically ordered categories: persons (adopter and partner), objects (desk, litter box), buildings and material arrangements (the house), other animals (the other cat). However, even though all these elements play an important part in the way the story unfolds, in this version of Daphne she, more than the other elements involved, is held responsible (by the adopter) for the crucial failure of the adoption process. The description of their 'bodily choreography' (eg how she hides when the adopter tries to reach her; or avoids all forms of contact; or huffs) follows a pattern of estrangement that will eventually lead to her being returned to the shelter. And that pattern of estrangement is mainly built over the features of her personality and her emotional states. She is depicted as unsociable, rejecting human approaches, and eventually aggressive. It is as if all emotions are placed on the side of Daphne, the animal; while humans are depicted as trying to deal 'rationally' with 'Daphne-the-problem.' Moreover, this highlights how animal practices show up the contingency and 'messiness' of the common worlds of humans and animals, their latent inconsistencies, contradictions and conflicts. From an animal expected to be

friendly and a member of the group, these practices render her a 'problematic animal,' whom humans eventually felt it was impossible to live with.

Therefore, the same animal, Daphne, a cat, is differently enacted by these performative practices. Daphne as an 'animal-victim' is mainly depicted as an element of a particular species, felines, represented as having behaviors specific to her species, and possibly problematic. Daphne as an 'animal-maladjusted,' on the other hand, is mostly described as an individual with a 'problematic' personality, when compared to other members of her species, such as the other cat in the house, other cats the adopter has owned, and his own representations of felines.

This double-edged representation of Daphne highlights the contingent and relational identity of animals, how they are 'done' and 'undone' in the unfolding of actions in which they participate to a certain extent. It challenges conceptions of the 'animal' as an ontological entity, pre-existing its encounters with the world: nature, humans, material and technological objects. It illustrates how 'flesh and blood' nonhuman animals are not fixed ontologies; rather they are contingent, ever changing, emergent entities. They are constant becomings. Emerging from their entanglements with the world around them, their ontological condition being radically *relational*.

This is not the same as saying that the animal is not a singular being, with her own and unique point of view, which remains in great part inaccessible to us, as Derrida (1997) put it. In fact, it is possible that it is precisely this condition of radical alterity, of absolute otherness, that brings about the discomfort expressed in the humans' attitudes and narratives about her. Like Derrida's cat, Daphne triggers an uncomfortable questioning among the humans, in this case about what it means to be 'a good human' and a 'good guardian'. Also made of feelings of shame, mainly enacted in the public shaming of the adopter and his decision to return her to the shelter. In addition, Daphne's 'unsubstitutable singularity' becomes celebrated through the way she is depicted on social media, as singularity resonates well with contemporary media language.

**In search of a silver lining: where is Daphne the Cat?**

This article reflected upon the ways we build and blur our ideas about companion animals, and human-animal boundaries, in our daily lives, and in our exchanges over social media – and what effects that may have on the animals that are constantly being kept at a distance, as an unsurmountable Otherness, despite all blurring of boundaries. Drawing on a case study of a story about a rescued cat, in an animal shelter, the article explored the construction of multiple, and conflicting versions, of this same cat. Both versions are the result of human

interactions on social media, and therefore do not 'reflect reality 'as it is' but rather constitute a meta-reality: a reality built over other realities, summoned to support one's beliefs, values and views of the world. In this particular case, of what it means to adopt a companion animal, specifically a cat, and what we can assume about humans from their behavior in this situation.

Challenging essentialist views and assumptions about 'feline nature', the concept of *animal practices* enabled us to observe how the animality of companion animals is (re)configured, in relation to humans, their expectations and experiences; as well as non-humans (other animals, material objects in the home and shelter, technologies). Technology becomes particularly relevant, as Daphne's participation in these entanglements is reproduced and expanded in time and space through a range of social media practices. As such, technology (in its both material and immaterial forms, as in the case of specific affordances) participates decisively in the definition of Daphne's practices that depend on distant relations and contexts (Law and Miele 2011). Furthermore, as a capacity to cause an impact or affect a network of actants, Daphne's agency is not only circumscribed to the practices in which she physically participates, but also to the ones that are extended in time and place and in which she no longer directly participates.

Paradoxically, Daphne, the Cat herself becomes invisible as her story unfolds along the thread of exchanges around her life. Her story is only told thoroughly in the first two posts,

from the shelter and from the adopter. Then, it either is distorted or simply fades away leaving room for the particular story/ies each Facebook user brings to the discussion: stories about their own pets, their own processes of adoption and mutual adaptation, stories of conflict and having to deal with 'problematic' behavior. However, even in these stories, the protagonists are seldom the animals themselves, but rather their human keepers. In particular, the good deeds of humans around the act of adopting, of resisting returning the animal despite the problems of mutual adaptation, of struggling to build a life in which the rescued animals, and all their possible 'problematic' conduct, may be accommodated.

Hence, Daphne's existence is approached from a humanized perspective, in two ways. In relation to what has been called here the 'trigger-narrative,' that of the animal shelter and its defenders, she is compared to kinship categories, mostly 'children,' and a member of the 'family.' This comparison blurs the line between her and her human fellows and is used to contend that, once an animal is taken under human guardianship, under no conditions is it justifiable to dispose of him/her. As one does not 'return' a child to its birthplace, likewise one never returns an adopted animal. The return of an animal is thus equated with an abandonment, and all interactions around this produce a version of Daphne as the 'animal-victim.' Paradoxically, this withdraws from her a kind of agency that would enable the interpretation of her behavior as a message concerning her needs.

By contrast, the 'counter-narrative' of the adopter and his few followers compares Daphne to assumptions about the sociable behavior expected of an 'ideal feminised human': to be gregarious, docile, caring, kind. She is therefore defined as an 'animal-maladjusted,' who has failed in the endeavor of adapting to the humans who gave her shelter.

Therefore, Daphne, the Cat, becomes an *effect* of these 'animal practices,' performed by humans and non-humans, during the adoption period (reported by the adopter), after her return to the shelter (reported by the latter), and in the digital space-time of social media, the exchanges and interactions through the thread of posts telling and commenting on her story. Both humans and non-humans participate in these 'animal practices': the adopter(s), the shelter keepers, Daphne, other cat(s), animals, and the wider cultural context in which 'cats' are constructed, including the rescued animals of the Facebook users, the space of the house and of the shelter, food and drink, and the technological tools and environment of social media, including its specific affordances.

Hence, different practices, including discursive practices performed on social media, construct *different versions of the same animal*: the '*animal-victim'* and the '*animal-maladjusted.'* Through these practices, there is a kind of pendular movement between *erasing* and *reinstalling differences* between animals and humans. *Erasing*, as when Daphne, cats and companion animals in general are equated with 'children' or members of the kinship

network that one can never relinquish, from a moral point of view. *Reinstalling*, as when Daphne is denied morality and intentional behavior, declared incapable of doing any harm by means of belonging to a different (non-human) species. Both versions represent human-animal boundaries as *insurmountable*, highlighting the *ambivalence* that crosscuts the attitudes of humans towards non-human animals.

Finally, in these digital discursive practices that intend to have the 'animal question' at their core, animals remain paradoxically 'invisible,' despite their apparent extreme visibility. So, where is Daphne, the Cat? Either she *disappears* or is *redefined as a caricature*. I have advanced the idea that, being at the same time present and absent, nonhuman animals may form a new kind of 'absent-referent.' A relevant question, thus, is whether sociology can contribute to restore animals, and Daphne in this particular case, from their digital "absent-referent" condition. I argue that sociology may play a role in this matter, and I have tried to show how its contribution may unfold (at least) in two ways: by deconstructing the ways animals are defined in the course of human-animal practices, in spite of being repeatedly put on the side of 'nature', and through this, uncovering the 'naturalization' of animals; by identifying the processes through which certain ideas of nonhuman animals are constructed and reproduced, in order to preserve the status quo based on species, gender or other form of social and political order.

Trying to find Daphne, the Cat, herself, thus raises important questions. First, drawing exclusively on discourses about Daphne is certainly a limitation of this research, as I did not engage directly with the animal, excluding her from my field of (direct) attention. Such methodological circumstances also contributed somewhat to the invisibility of Daphne, and hence to reproduce the general invisibility of nonhuman animals, in human-animal relations. Second, it raises questions about power relations between humans and nonhumans, and the anthropocentric distribution of resources in which non-human animals always occupy a disadvantaged position (Carter and Charles, 2011, p. 11).

It is true that, as ANT defends, power within these webs of relations is also contingent, subject to constant change. It does not exclusively run top-down. Humans exert their power over Daphne in different ways, as described previously. However, these are unstable balances, and ones that Daphne is also able to affect. When she urinates outside her litter box, for example, she *affects* her human guardians, and has the power to change the family equilibrium. When she refuses to eat, she affects the shelter's staff, their decisions, their time, their practices and behaviours, their beliefs (vg. about her health status). However, in the end of the day, the fact that she is being held in captivity makes her more vulnerable than the humans involved, in the long term. In this sense, the life of Daphne, as all nonhuman animals, is affected by her location within a human-centred distribution of resources in which she

occupies a disadvantaged position. Her agential conditions are modified beyond her will, as when the humans decide where she is supposed to live (the shelter, the house, the shelter again). Moreover, her choices, when exercised, are already circumscribed: she may choose not to eat, but she is under technical and medical surveillance, to secure her survival.

The story of Daphne has triggered a reflection on whether animals are the *effects* of social practices in which they, too, participate, rather than entities that pre-exist any kind of interaction with the world around them. Several elements, human and non-human, contributed to these 'animal practices'. Extended in time and place, beyond the specific contexts in which they were triggered, these practices gained new breadth in the digital time-place of social media, whose particular affordances augmented the intensity of the exchanges involved. In all this, Daphne remains the weakest link, the least powerful part in this relation between human and non-human.



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